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Crypt probably Calvert family's, archaeologists say

By Frank D. Roylance
Evening Sun Staff

ST. MARY'S CITY — Archaeologists digging in a meadow here said today they have uncovered what they believe is the crypt of Maryland's founding family, the Calverts, beneath the ruins of the 300-year-old Great Brick Chapel.

A week of digging in what had been the north arm of the cross-shaped church ended today in the discovery of not one, but three, gray lead coffins.

The coffins, bowed by the weight of the earth above them, lay side by side in a pit 3 feet deep and about 5 feet square.

Henry Miller, chief archaeologist for Historic St. Mary's City, said the prestigious location of the crypt within the chapel and the cost and rarity of lead coffins in the 1600s led him to conclude that the coffins belong to Maryland's founding family.

"He is the one man who died in Maryland, of sufficient wealth and stature — and a Catholic — to be buried in the church, and in a lead coffin," said Miller.

"With three of them here, we suspect this is the Calvert family crypt in Maryland," Miller said.

The largest of the coffins, about 2 feet wide, is believed to be that of Philip Calvert, Maryland's first chancellor and a half-brother of Cecil Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore. Philip died in 1682.

Beside it lay a smaller coffin, about 18 inches wide. "If it is an adolescent male, we have an excellent candidate," Miller said. He speculated that the coffin may contain the remains of Cecil Calvert, son of Charles Calvert and grandson of Cecil, Lord Baltimore.

Young Cecil was also the grand-nephew of Philip. He died in Maryland in 1681 at the age of 14.

Beside the smaller coffin is a third, only 9 inches wide, and much shorter than the others. Miller said he suspects it may contain the remains of an infant child of Charles Calvert.

Currently there are no plans to open the coffins, so the identities of the dead remain something of an uncertainty.

The last inch of dirt on the largest coffin was removed today following ceremonies attended by Gov. William Donald Schaefer and Bishop William G. Curley.

See CALVERT, A18, Col. 1

Calvert 1

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Calverts' crypt believed found

CALVERT, From A1

Schaefer accepted an invitation from Miller to help with the digging. Under a large green and white tent, with TV cameras and 100 spectators crowded around the pit, the governor lay prone on the chapel floor in his suit and tie, leaned into the 3-foot grave and scraped away at the dirt on the coffin lid with a gold-colored trowel.

He was assisted by archaeologist Molly Quast, 22, who is working with Historic Saint Mary's City.

Archaeologists had hoped to find name plates on the coffin lids, but none was found. Miller said the coffins are the first 17th-century lead coffins found in the U.S. since 1799, when vandals broke into a vault at Trinity Church across from the Great Brick Chapel.

Miller's colleagues have also uncovered traces of the original wooden church built at St. Mary's City soon after Maryland was founded there in 1634.

In addition to numerous human bones found under the church floor, archaeologists have found a Dutch pipe stem dated from 1630 to 1650 and a Spanish medal of St. Mary de Pilar, the only religious artifact found so far at the site.

Philip Calvert, who died in 1682, was the half-brother of Cecil Calvert — Lord Baltimore — and uncle of Cecil's successor, Charles Calvert.

Philip served as chancellor of Maryland, an administrative post in the proprietary colony similar to today's secretary of state. He also was an astute lawyer who wrote influential legislation protecting the colony's orphans, and served as chief justice of the Provincial Court, Miller said.

The presence of something extremely dense beneath the ruins of the 323-year-old Catholic church was first detected in August. Ground-penetrating radar found the object under the north transept of the cross-shaped church.

Miller said the disturbed soil above the object, and the presence of 30 other graves within the church walls, suggested it was a grave.

Disturbance of the adjacent foundation brickwork and soil also suggested to Miller that the colonists cut a trench through the chapel wall in order to get the heavy coffin into the building, then resealed the wall.

The Great Brick Chapel at St. Mary's City was built around 1667 — just 33 years after Maryland's founding. It replaced the original St. Maries Chapel, the first Catholic chapel in English America.

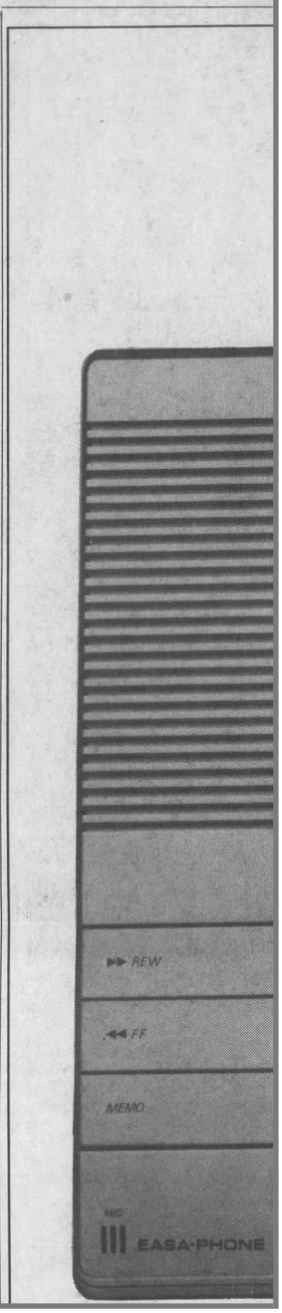
The first building was a wooden structure burned in 1645 by Englishmen working for the anti-Catholic Parliament.

Brick, stone, grave markers — everything of value above the ground — was eventually removed and reused elsewhere. By the 1730s, the remains of the church had vanished beneath pasture and cornfield.

No descriptions or drawings of the church are known to have survived.

Archaeologists who exposed the ruins in August found the cruciform building was 55 feet long and 58 feet wide at the transepts. The nave is about 31 feet wide. The brick foundation walls are 3 feet thick, dug more than 5 feet into the ground.

"This is an absolutely massive building for the period," Miller has said.



Calvert 2

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